

work was aesthetically very pleasing, both to him and also to me, as an outside observer, but so long as patterns have been identified and made clear, the artistic merit of the pattern is not important for the process of therapy.

I was very struck by the potency both of the process and the finished pattern for this man's understanding of the sequencing, structures and connections of his life. He was so excited by it that he wanted to delay working on individual strands and motifs until he had had a chance to work more fully with the overall pattern; to appreciate and attune to it in as many ways as possible.

So we choreographed some movement work for him based on the flow of patterns he had created in his life and which were represented creatively on the paper. The first time he performed the entire dance sequence was tremendously cathartic for him, and each time afterwards was a centring, a state of presence within himself, a ritual act of faith in the integrity of his life pattern and, having articulated, painted and danced his way to understanding it, his ability to change it. People's life issues are complex, of course, and need to be addressed in detail in a variety of ways (including the 'talking therapy' with which he had begun), but this process of life-design analysis gave him such a vivid eagle's-eye view of his personal history and present situation, so that he could get his bearings, it gave him the impetus for the hard detailed work to unravel some of his twisted emotional strands. The transformation in his general wellbeing was remarkable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dwarfs:

Transforming with the Web of Wyrð

— The Threads of Wyrð —

Changing the pattern of our lives necessitates an understanding of the nature of the golden strings, the threads that are 'fastened under the hall of the moon' by the Nornir. The threads are more than a poetic fantasy. They are a metaphor which carries and represents meaning. In the discourse of mythology, of shamanic states of consciousness, of dreamtime, the golden strings have been seen, experienced, touched and manipulated; so what is it that has been experienced in human lives that gives rise to such an image? And what may we learn from it today?

One answer to this question lies in a tale from the ancient tribal cultures of north-west Europe, recorded by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson. My recounting of it below is based on Snorri's version.¹

The story is about three gods and a wolf. The three gods were Odin, the magical, cunning, archetypal shaman figure and most dominant of the deities; Thor, the big, blustering god of the farmers who constantly went to battle with the giants; and Tyr, an ancient sky god, harking back to prehistoric times, and who was just coming to the end of his reign as a god and was to be soon replaced by other, newer deities.

The gods adopted the wolf as a pet. Called Fenrir, it was a beautiful and impressive pet, and the gods were proud of it. For a time, that is, while it was small. But as it got bigger and bigger, the gods began to become nervous of it. Soon only the ancient sky god Tyr had the courage to go up to it and give it food. The wolf gulped it down and grew even bigger.

Then one day the gods were alarmed to hear a prophecy that at

some point in the future Fenrir was going to injure them. They said, 'We've got to do something about this wolf before he gets completely beyond our control, before we can no longer contain him.' So they formed a plan to make a really strong fetter, a chain which they could wrap around the wolf and fasten to the rocks so that he would not be able to chase them.

They commissioned a huge chain (which they named Loding) to be built, a very strong chain. When it was ready the problem was how to get the wolf to accept this chain without attacking them. They knew they would not be able to put it on by force. But Odin, who was vain himself, proposed they appeal to the wolf's vanity. Approaching the huge wolf nervously they said, from a little distance, 'We've got a new chain, Fenrir, and because you're such a strong wolf, we wondered if you'd like to test your strength against it?' Fenrir looked at the chain, which had taken months to construct, and laughed derisively. 'No problem. Wrap it around me.'

Eagerly they wrapped the chain around the wolf very tightly, banged it deeply into the rocks, and secured it very well. But as soon as Fenrir strained against the fetter, it snapped. He had escaped from Loding.

When the gods saw this they were very afraid. They knew they had to do something drastic. So immediately they commissioned a fetter twice as long, twice as thick, and twice as strong as the first one, the biggest that had ever been made, which they called Dromi. As soon as it was completed they dragged it back to Fenrir. The wolf was not too keen on this one. This looked like a serious challenge. The gods played on his vanity again: 'Fenrir, if you could break this really big chain, you would be ever so famous. Your name would go down in history.'

The wolf considered it. He reasoned to himself that although the fetter was very strong, he had grown in might since he had broken Loding. And, he thought, one has to take risks in order to achieve real fame. He allowed the gods to place the enormous fetter around him.

When the gods said they were ready, Fenrir snarled, shook himself, banged the chain against the ground and, struggling against it, dug his feet in so hard that the fetter burst into pieces that were flung by the

force far and wide into the sky where they formed the stars. They twinkled prettily but, unfortunately for the gods, Fenrir had now escaped also from Dromi. And his fame did, indeed, spread, as confirmed by the fact that I am telling you about him now.

The gods were terrified. It looked as if the dangerous and still-growing wolf would never be able to be bound. Reluctantly, Odin decided to send a messenger down to the Lowerworld to seek the help of the dwarfs. It was a humiliation for the mighty gods so to beg for dwarfish help, but there was no other course of action open to them. They were desperate.

Dwarfs were the blacksmiths of the Lowerworld; they forged magic jewellery and weapons. But they could also work with psychic and spirit forces on their anvils. And so the gods, rather embarrassed, explained to the dwarfs what had happened, and begged them to make a fetter strong enough to hold the giant wolf. The dwarfs drove a hard bargain, but when finally a deal was struck they agreed to make a fetter that would chain Fenrir and stop him from rampaging through the heavens.

But when the gods went back to collect their massive chain, the one that would really tie down the wolf once and for all, they were horrified and furious when they saw what the dwarfs had made. It looked like a thin piece of silk thread. 'We're not paying for this!' thundered the gods who, though they made a lot of noise, were not really in a very good position to say what would and what would not work.

'Just a minute,' cautioned the dwarfs. 'You don't yet know what this fetter is made of. It is a very special one. It is called Gleipnir.' Proudly they started to list the materials of their work: 'It's made up of six ingredients. One is the noise that a cat makes when it moves. The second is the beard of a woman. The third is the growing roots of a mountain. The fourth is the breath of a fish. And the fifth is the spittle of a bird . . .' The gods were beside themselves with anger; so far the fetter contained nothing of any substance at all. 'And the final thing is the sinews of a bear.' Which was actually the only material part of the whole chain.

'But what is the value of these ingredients?' bellowed the gods.

'Apart from the sinews of the bear, the ingredients are nothing at all!'

'Precisely!' retorted the dwarfs. 'And that is what gives it its power. Plus our magic of course.'

And then the truth dawned on the gods. The dwarfs had made a bond of spells. It was a magic fetter. 'Well,' said the gods reluctantly, 'we've paid for it, we'd better go back and try it on Fenrir.'

The gods took the fetter, which was as smooth and soft as a ribbon of silk, back to Fenrir. They felt pretty silly trying to explain to him that, although the fetter looked delicate, it was stronger than it appeared, and they passed it from one to another, each in turn attempting to break it to demonstrate to Fenrir just what a test of his famous strength would be this fetter. It was an unconvincing presentation. Fenrir was not impressed. 'I'm not being taken in by that thing. It's so slight a cord that I would gain no fame by breaking it.' The gods' hearts sank. 'And anyway,' concluded Fenrir, who was quite an intelligent wolf, 'if it has been made by magic, guile and cunning, it's getting nowhere near my legs.'

Poor gods. They banged their heads against the rocks in frustration and despair. They begged Fenrir to try to break the fetter, but he refused. Finally, they said, 'Look, Fenrir, if we put this on you and you cannot break out of it, we promise that we shall let you free immediately. Only a coward would refuse such a challenge.'

Fenrir's hackles rose, and his eyes glowered coldly. 'Rather than be accused of cowardice by you three,' he snapped, 'I'll do it. But only on one condition: that one of you place his hand in my mouth as a pledge that your promise is made in good faith.' This cunning device put the gods in a bit of a bother. They knew that, if the fetter did bind Fenrir, they had no intention of keeping their promise to free him, and so Odin and Thor did not want to risk placing their hands between Fenrir's huge jaws. But old Tyr thought that Fenrir's bargain sounded like quite a good idea. Tyr put out his right hand and laid it in the wolf's mouth.

Fenrir was surprised, but now had to go along with the bargain. Eyeing his teeth nervously, the gods settled the magic fetter tightly around the enormous wolf, and quickly scuttled back to a safe distance, the two who hadn't got their hands in his mouth, that is. When

they said 'Ready!' Fenrir started pulling, tugging, digging his paws in, as he had done before with Loding and Dromi, trying to tear the cord free of the ground. It did not budge. He thrashed around, growling and howling, but the more fiercely he struggled, the more tightly tied he became. All the gods laughed in relief. All except Tyr, that is. He lost his hand.

— Chaos and Spontaneity —

There are a number of interesting possible meanings which lie behind this story. First of all, it is helpful to note the mythological 'identity' of Fenrir in the culture of our ancestors. In a way he is related to the god Odin, who was the dominant deity at the time of the story, and was taking over from Tyr as the inheritor of the powers of the sky god. Odin was a complex deity with many facets to his nature, each of which was manifested in the stories and cosmology by another named god who would accompany him on his adventures. But in understanding the meaning of the stories, one has to treat Odin as the chief protagonist, and the other gods as his aspects.²

One very important aspect of Odin was identified with a being who seemed to have god-like status, although was never listed as officially among the gods. He was called Loki. In the ancient stories of north-west Europe, Loki played the part of the trickster, who brought mischief and confusion into the world of the gods. His exploits challenged, and threatened to turn upside down, the natural order of things. There was nothing charming or amusing about Loki, as there sometimes is in trickster figures in other cultural traditions. Loki 're-ordered the cosmos' from time to time, and his actions often threatened to cause destruction to the harmony of the cosmos. He represented the forces of chaos, always shadowing the structured world of the gods like a hidden threat, and looking for any chance to strike.³

Loki had three children with a giantess called Angrboda. One child became the Middle Earth serpent, a binding and containing being who encircled the Earth; a second became the Queen of the Lowerworld, a spirit-woman who presided over the darkest recesses

of the realm of the dead. And the third child was the wolf Fenrir. So as an offspring of Loki, the wolf Fenrir represented the always threatening forces of chaos, the potential destruction of harmony and order.

On the other hand, while Fenrir is a creature who is fettered, tied down, and restricted, his chaotic energy has within it elements of freedom, spontaneity, and vitality. He represents a part of ourselves. Fenrir reminds us that at every moment of our lives we are constrained and limited by the many subtle, unseen bonds we place on ourselves, which have settled into place during our lifetime. Our lives are necessarily involved with fetters, for every adjustment we make to life's demands, every psychological defence we erect, fear we avoid, temptation we succumb to, may constitute one of the dwarfs' fetters.

Of course, many of the fetters will always be there, and need to be in place. Some elements of the knot of fibres in which we each live provides a necessary framework to give pattern to our lives.

But fetters are all-encompassing. They restrict the ways in which we are able to deal with issues, and they are powerful, especially as they are so insidious as to be unseen. Identifying and removing, or shifting, or altering these fetters can be a liberating experience. Remarkably, to shift the pattern requires, sometimes, just a light and subtle alteration or refinement: the potent effectiveness of the most gossamer of spells, a revisioned perspective which can transform a life situation before our eyes.

In the mythology of ancient Scandinavia, the day came when Fenrir did escape from the dwarfs' fetters that bound him, and his escape to freedom marked the end of the world. Absolute chaos ensued, and the entire world fell to uproar and burned to the ground. And yet, out of this devastated landscape, in the myth, a new dawn arose. Life began anew.⁴ So perhaps the Fenrir within each of us needs to escape once or twice in our lives. There are devastating results for a time, but then life is reborn.

— Using Dwarfish Magic —

But for life to be viable, for there to be a psychological and spiritual balance, we need to temper the spontaneity and joy of chaos, for it

also carries with it the terror of destruction. In the story of Fenrir, the gods tried to do this, to contain the wolf they were afraid of by meeting force with force. But they were playing on the wolf's own home ground. He was too strong for their fetters. Of course, the gods are in this story enacting a scenario with which we are all familiar from time to time. When we face a problem, one which feels strong and potentially dangerous, threatening to bring chaos to our personal or professional arrangements, or relationships, or inner harmony, we often attempt to shackle it by fighting strength with strength, fire with fire. We attempt to deal with it, to take effective action, contain it, using the normal materials of everyday life. We wrestle with the problem, looking for a quick fix, trying to nail it down as the gods attempted with the wolf.

Sometimes this works; we are able to cope with the issue that has arisen. But sometimes the problem is more intractable than that. It does not go away. It resists, breaks through our attempts to contain it, and grows bigger. Panicked, we try again with more of the same. We give it extra attention, more of our time and worry; we try, try and try again. Extra struggle with the same materials. We wrap it in chains. But it rises up and breaks free with devastating effect. We are lost.

This is the masculine path to problem-solving.⁵ To challenge, to confront, to defeat. It is redundant. A psychological tautology. Rather, to cope with an issue, to solve a problem, to alter the design of a life, requires us to find a way of revisioning the fibres, re-placing them around our problems, using subtlety and insight.

In the story, when this confrontational tactic did not work, the gods needed to turn to a different realm of action: that of the dwarfs. The dwarfs, as we shall see later, provided Freya, the shamaness goddess, with the bases of her wisdom. They represent the mythologically feminine path to magic, in which the intuitive and subtle is rendered as having great power. These are not necessarily gender-specific ways of approaching problems: both paths are open to each of us.

In the feminine path, rather than identifying the obvious obstacle, the ready-made remedy, one looks for underlying forces: the language of the threads. As with the powerful, magical fetter of the dwarfs, the ingredients of such an approach are subtle, even inconsequential in

themselves, but are very potent in combination. By engendering an awareness of all the subtle forces impinging on an issue, a fetter can be constructed which is more powerful, and long-lasting, than a more dramatic and obvious 'fix'. Like drops of soft water falling on to hard rock, they wear away in time the most fixed of obstacles. To identify the threads in this way is to set aside the conscious mind, the controlling mind, and to use instead the resources of intuition and inner wisdom.

Note that the gods had difficulty in getting themselves to work intuitively. They felt humiliated in giving up their own sense of power, and even when they had resolved to seek the help of the intuitive mind, they had to have the insight and courage to realise the value of what had been revealed. Because the gossamer, magical fetter which finally chained Fenrir down looked insubstantial at first sight, the gods almost rejected it.

As a young adult I studied judo for some time. Along with certain other martial arts, this remarkable practice teaches that while pitting strength directly against a stronger opponent invariably leads to defeat, the use of the subtleties of speed, balance, insight, and a total concentration on the present, can lead to using the opponent's strength against him. The direction in which he is pulling becomes the direction in which he suddenly, inadvertently, will be propelled with a force which uses the momentum he was already generating for himself. Once this is mastered, larger and heavier opponents can be toppled and thrown with ease.

The story of the gods and Fenrir reminds us that psychological problems are often like this. In our lives, the technique of dwarfish magic is to look for the subtle problem which lies behind the obvious problem. The dwarfs realised that Fenrir could be fettered by wrapping him in something which used his strength against him, which tied him up as a result of, not in opposition to, his struggling. Most issues in our lives are not, as we know, unidimensional. There are underlying forces at work, hidden at first, not observable to the conscious, controlling mind, but identifiable through intuition, through recourse to the imagination, the subtle realms. And it is to these inner resources that we need to turn when we are faced with a challenge

which is too strong, too complex, too deeply hidden within ourselves and others to face on its own terms rather than ours. Here we need the language of fibres and threads, dwarfish intelligence.

Spellcasting in Wyrð was often conceived of as placing or releasing bonds from a person. Odin was depicted as able to place binding spells on people, as the dwarfs did on Fenrir, and these were imaged sometimes as knots; also there are examples of memorial stones on which Odin is shown beside a kind of knot in the form of three triangles, linked together.⁶ Odin had the power to lay bonds on the mind, so that men became helpless in battle. Symbols representing this knot of Odin are also found beside figures of the horse and the wolf on cremation urns from early cemeteries in East Anglia.

The power to bind was understood also by the early Christians in western Europe, as we see in the example of a Mercian king's warrior named Imma, who was taken prisoner by the Northumbrians after the battle on the Trent in 679. The chains by which he was bound continually burst open and so he was brought before his captors who asked him 'whether, through witchcraft or through runes, he brake his bonds?' Imma, who was a Christian, explained that this was not the reason, but that his brother, who was an abbot, believing him dead from his wounds sustained in the battle, was having masses said for his soul: 'the celebration whereof occasioned that none could bind him without his being immediately loosed again'.

Either Imma believed in the power of binding and the facility for spellcasting to break the bonds, as practised by the indigenous shamans, or he was a particularly quick-thinking man who told the pagans what he thought would scare them into granting him safety!

In workshops I have sometimes explored with the participants the many lessons to be learned from the story of Fenrir. Often we begin by enacting the story. It is exhilarating to dramatise, and the roles of the gods and the dwarfs are always highly coveted. Rehearsing and performing the story seems invariably to result in hilarity and helpless laughter at the conundrum facing the giants, their relations with the dwarfs, and the nature of the little people themselves. With larger groups of participants we can also create the chains Loding and Dromi, which explode with satisfying effect under the strain of

Fenrir's struggles. But the sheer exuberant energy of these dramatisations is grounded by an awareness that we are participating in one of those timeless tales that have deeper meaning, that can teach us something.

Afterwards we work in a variety of ways to establish connections between the dynamics of the story and the events of our own lives. Participants recall from their lives incidents, experiences, relationships, problems in which we committed the same mistakes as the gods with Fenrir: examples where we tried to fight issues of superior strength with our inferior strength. In individual work, or in groups where this sort of personal material can be shared, I ask the people with whom I am working to recount one or more of these examples in order to fix their awareness and deepen their perception of what sort of life situations are reminiscent of the gods struggling with large but breakable chains in attempts to contain a larger problem.

And then, in a more pleasant memory meditation, we recall examples from our own experience where we gained insight into the underlying energy of the problem, the deeper knots of threads which lead to a situation we wish to resolve, and the small shift in balance which allowed us to use the strength of the problem against itself, and to contain it with magical fetters. Reliving these latter examples is extremely valuable, for recognising them helps to resist the temptation to turn automatically to the controlling mind when facing a problem.

— Dwarfs of Transformation —

But the dwarfs can take us deeper than this. They were beings who ruled primarily over the transition from the mundane world of the psyche to the sacred world of spirit. Their domain extends beyond the psychological conundra of our everyday lives into the realm of the spiritual.

The dwarf is a transformational spirit being in many shamanic cultures; the idea of a dwarf who grants power or serves as guardian spirit is widespread in North America, for example, especially west of the Rocky Mountains in the tribes of the Plateau Groups (Thompson,

Shuswap) and in northern California (Shasta, Atsugewi, Northern Maidu, and Yuki).⁷

In European shamanic mythology the dwarfs lived in the Lowerworld as magical smiths. The Lowerworld was the realm of knowledge, and resting place of the dead. In a culture in which oral knowledge predominated, people took their wisdom with them when they died, which is why a shaman's journey to the land of the dead was highly prized, for it was there that answers to the most difficult questions could be obtained. Shamans engendered an altered state of consciousness conducive to the sort of journey or voyage which transported them to the spirit world, but the direction of the quest was not celestial, not towards the gods, but downwards, into the Lowerworld. The dwarf-smith's 'power over fire', and especially the magic of metals, have everywhere given smiths the reputation of sorcerers. Hence the ambivalent attitude towards them: they are at once despised and venerated. They used heat to transmute elements of the Earth into knives, swords, and beautiful jewellery. They created, and wove, fibres of beauty and strength in pattern-welded swords, and the fantastic and intricate swirling thread designs of Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and Celtic jewellery. Theirs was thread magic of a material kind.

But their greatest skill was in transmuting the souls and bodies of apprentices into shamans. The dwarfs were spirit creatures who were the catalysts for our own transformation.⁸

So how did the presence of dwarfs make itself felt in the shamanic world of our ancient European ancestors?

Myths all over the world feature apprentice shamans being carried into the Lowerworld by an animal spirit on his back, or holding him in its jaws, or 'swallowing' him to 'kill and resuscitate him'. The spirits come from every quarter . . . and speak through the shaman's voices. The dwarfs worked in this way, too. But they had many guises, secret identities.

Anglo-Saxon linguistic scholars have for example pointed out that the word 'dwarf' goes back to an Indo-Germanic form which is near the Greek 'serfos', a stinging or biting insect. And in Breton, Welsh and Cornish the word 'cor' also means both 'dwarf' and 'spider'.

Furthermore, the Swedish 'dverg' means not only 'dwarf' but also 'spider', and dwarfs in Scandinavian legend are specially associated with spinning. In other words the deep, original nature of the dwarf and the spider are identical. The spider was in fact a shapeshifter dwarf, who could spin the web of life anew.⁹

The Anglo-Saxon *Spellbook* contains an example in which the dwarf appears in the form of a spider creature and carries off an apprentice for initiation. The entry is listed as a 'Night Mare'.

— The World of Concealment —

Here a spider-creature came stalking in.
He had his bridle-web in his hand.
He said that you were his steed,
he laid his bonds on your neck.

Soon they began to set off from the land.
And as soon as they came off the land,
then their limbs began to cool.

Then the sister of the creature came stalking in
She made an end to it, and oaths she swore
that never this one the sick should harm
Nor him who could obtain this charm
Or understand how this charm to sing.

The spider goddess incantation, even when rendered into modern English as above, still retains some of the impressive imagery from its days in its native Anglo-Saxon, when it served as part of a tribal ritual for initiation into shamanism.¹⁰ It is a spell which tells the story, in highly condensed and coded form, of the journey of an apprentice to the Otherworld, the world of knowledge, the initiatory testing grounds for a man about to become a shaman.

In all shamanic traditions, sickness was a gateway to wisdom. In the fevers of illness, the altered states of mind in which visions of another reality became possible, certain people were chosen by the spirits for transporting to worlds of knowledge. In recently surviving shamanic cultures, accounts of illness as a prelude to initiation reveal that the

illness was sometimes sudden and severe, but it could also be a progressive change in demeanour and wellbeing, in which the future shaman becomes meditative, seeks solitude, sleeps a great deal, seems absent-minded, has prophetic dreams and even acute symptoms such as seizures. Dreams and visions experienced during the throes of sickness might determine a future shaman's career in a very short time, especially in the case of fevers in which the patient would see 'other worlds'.¹¹

The spider-creature incantation probably occurred in a setting in which a 'patient', or sick apprentice shaman, is visited by a shaman who chants the lines we have in the document. These rituals were usually witnessed by an audience of at least family members and elders, and possibly by the whole settlement. As the apprentice is in a fevered state, and therefore open to journeys to the Otherworld, the shaman begins to offer visual imagery which helps to provide some structure for the visions. In the shamanic world of our ancestors, this soul journey was considered to have a validity at least the equal of the everyday state we call normal consciousness.

Some of the tribes of early Europe referred to this Otherworld, the realm visible and accessible only from altered states of consciousness, as 'halja', which means 'the place of concealment'. Halja was believed to have originated at the formation of the cosmos when ice and fire met to produce the highly charged mist of life. Some of the mist formed into ice-rain, and then into the shapes of giants, from whence came the Wyrð Sisters. But some of the mist remained – a very important feature of the mythological landscape, because it was here that glimpses of the true reality were possible; visions and shadows of original and eternal truth. Later, the Lowerworld of occult knowledge was called Niflheim – the first element of the word meaning 'mist' or 'fog'.¹²

Represented mythologically as a sacred space beneath the Earth, one way of understanding the Lowerworld today is to conceive of it as effectively a place in the mind. But this is not to say that it was merely in the mind, or only in the imagination; the Lowerworld was of sacred dimensions, and was equivalent in power to the concept of heaven which characterises Christianity and various other religions.

The Celtic peoples' image of this realm of concealment was very close to the everyday world. Enticing and yet threatening, it hung intangibly near, like a reflection in a deep, clear pool. Natural features of the landscape provided the dividing line between this world and that. They were also the points of juncture, the connections, the doorways into the Otherworld. Fords across the rivers, the ridges of mountains or high hills, the boundaries demarcating tribal lands – all these were charged with magical power and were points through which the mist of the Otherworld could seep into this world.¹³

Other liminal points at which the material world (Middle Earth) and the Otherworld (Lowerworld) came close included psychological shifts between states of consciousness, moments of light shift at dawn and dusk, turning points in the periodic waxing and waning of the moon, New Year's Day, the summer and winter festivals. All were occasions when the unseen powers from the Otherworld came very close, and were to be guarded against, unless one was preparing an intentional journey into those realms. At these times and in these places, powers from the Otherworld might disturb the expected unfolding of events.¹⁴

On Samhain (Hallowe'en) the interpenetration was mutual and open for all who sought successfully, for it was the night of celebration of the unity of the two worlds, which are really only separated by states of mind and appearance and actually coexist.

To reach this Otherworld in search of the wisdom which could be obtained there, one had to cross a normal wood, a hill, a river or a stretch of water. But entry to the Otherworld, the transition from normal to magical landscape, was dependent upon having been prepared for this sacred journey by passing some test to prove oneself worthy and, in so doing, ensuring that one was capable of entering and sustaining the states of mind and spirit that characterised the Otherworld.

Sometimes shamans would undertake prepared journeys to the Otherworld, shamanistic initiations, or quests for answers to questions of healing and divination. The mounds or megalithic monuments known as 'sidh' were opened and entered, or sat upon, by shamans, for they provided communication points between the two worlds.

The beings of the Otherworld could enter this world, and so could shamans.

The world of concealment, the halja, sometimes required powerful ritual experiences in order to enter it. For an initiate shaman, election by the 'spirits' for access to the secrets of the Otherworld was imperative, as was a journey to the Wyrð Sisters, who reweave his destiny as he changed from a normal person to a shaman.

After that, once someone has been allowed to see such things, as a shaman they are taught techniques for generating inner heat, and for entering the Otherworld at will. And it is in these states of consciousness that the invisible threads of Wyrð manifest. They are visible in the shaman's vision.

— The Spider Spell —

As with the rest of the Saxon *Spellbook*, this shamanic ritual was recorded by Christian monks or scribes, who were the only people in western Europe in those times, before the first millennium, to use secular rather than sacred writing.

The preface to the lines of initiatory detail is Christianised, as are elements of many of the spells, with the most blatant pre-Christian elements replaced with appropriate Christian terminology and ritual. Here the text describes a preliminary ritual, saying, 'You must take seven little wafers, such as are used in worship, and write these names on each wafer . . .' and there then follows a list of biblical names. This Christian introduction almost certainly replaces the carving of nine rune-sticks as an accompaniment, for the instruction then goes: 'and then let a virgin go to him and hang it on his neck. And do so for three days.' The number nine was the primary sacred number in rituals of the Germanic and some of the Celtic tribes of ancient Europe.

In the original version, then, the virgin brings to the person undergoing the ritual the rune-stave, cut with the appropriate runic message and then strung around the neck with a leather thong or piece of rope. The involvement of a virgin marks out that the power of this ritual is female magic. Indeed, it is likely that the woman who performed the presentation of the rune-sticks was originally a shamaness, with the

requirement for a virgin being another Christian interpolation.

The instructions require the chant detailed at the beginning of this chapter to be sung over the initiate three times, in either ear and above his head. Three times three is nine, once again the sacred number.

— The Lines of the Spell —

The first lines of the chant are by the shaman to the patient, framing and setting up the apprentice's visions:

Here a spider-creature came stalking in.
He had his bridle-web in his hand.
He said that you were his steed,
he laid his bonds on your neck.

Harnessed by the bonds of the spider creature, the apprentice is about to be ridden. Now the shaman talks to the audience, describing the flight into the air of the apprentice spider:

Soon they began to set off from the land.
And as soon as they came off the land,
then their limbs began to cool.

And then came the initiation by the Wyrd Sisters:

Then the sister of the creature came stalking in
She made an end to it, and oaths she swore
that never this one the sick should harm
Nor him who could obtain this charm
Or understand how this charm to sing.¹⁵

Spirit helpers normally appear to the apprentice in response to the chant of the shaman . . . the words of power in this case conjuring a spider with a magic web. And once the apprentice had 'seen' this, and allowed it to be placed on him, he is bound to become a shaman. For the web is the very web of Wyrd, spun and woven by the Wyrd Sisters.

So the lines tell the narrative of the apprentice, hot from fever of illness, or from trance-inducing activity such as drumming, dancing,

meditation, fasting, and perhaps drinking hallucinatory substances, being visited and 'captured' by one of the Three Sisters in spider form, wrapped in her fibres as a bridle, and ridden into the sky. As they rise into the sky 'his limbs begin to cool', and he is taken to a place where one of the other sisters comes in and proclaims that he is to be protected; he cannot be harmed.

The image of the spider, wrapping the initiate in a web and riding him into the sky is awesome. But what is intriguing is what happens to the apprentice after he is delivered, bound by the web, to the place where the sister 'made an end to it', protects him, and shows him the secrets of the charm? The sister is one of the Wyrd Sisters, and perhaps represents all three of them.

Mythologies from all around the world depict the ascent to the sky by the shaman-to-be, along with other images, in a spider's web. A parallel experience, in which the initiate can see the fibres and the other things that come with it, comes from the Australian shaman of the Yarlalde tribe, who also have traditions closely paralleling Wyrd, which describes the initiatory terrors that accompany the vision of the spirits: 'When you lie down to see the prescribed visions, and you do see them, do not be frightened, because they will be horrible . . . If you get up you will not see these scenes, but when you lie down again, you will see them, unless you get too frightened. If you do, you will break the web threads on which these scenes are hung. If you see and hear these things without fear, you will never be frightened of anything . . .'¹⁶ The web of Wyrd holds visions which are gateways to spiritual insights and transcendence.

Even more revealing, the spider spell has remarkable parallels with a recently surviving shamanic ritual from the Malekulan culture, a twentieth-century Stone-Age tribal society in the New Hebrides.¹⁷ The parallel is separated by thousands of miles of land and a thousand years of history, but comparative research on shamanism has shown remarkable parallels the world over in initiatory techniques and narratives which seem to persist across time as well as distance.

Shamanic rituals tap an archetypal level of human functioning, basic ways of encountering the world psychologically and psychically, and so it should not be surprising that such parallels exist.

The narratives of the Malekulans can help us to see how the full story of the experience undergone by the Anglo-Saxon shaman may have developed beyond the few lines afforded by the ancient manuscript. The Malekulans have, at the centre of their shamanic initiation rituals, a labyrinth dance, in which the initiate must show that he is knowledgeable about the prescribed pattern of approach into a cave, wherein he is taught secrets. The dance is for men, and it is presided over by women, as goddesses of the labyrinth. The labyrinth is dedicated to the spider goddess Le-hev-hev, the spinner of fate who is also a 'Mother of Rebirth'.

For the Malekulans the newly 'dead' (apprentice shamans undergoing illness and ritual death), after being bodily abducted and taken into the sky by spider spirits, will arrive at a cave by the sea. There a labyrinth design is traced by Le-hev-hev on the sand at the entrance to the cave. On seeing the 'dead' person, the spider goddess obliterates half the design.

The apprentice has to show that he knows the pattern well, and dances the maze, completing the pattern in the sand. The guardian ghost of the cave, satisfied that the soul of the apprentice shaman knows its dance, releases the soul to join other ancestors in the depths of the cave, where it is taught great secrets known only to the dead. And then the soul is reborn, as the shaman, with knowledge, wisdom, magical powers and skills.

— The Goddess of Dwarfs —

Shapeshifting was quite usual for supernatural beings and, fortunately, the material in this spell is clear enough for us to be able to detect the various disguises. The spider creature was not exactly as it seemed. It had other guises, other identities. The Anglo-Saxon word in the spell translated as 'steed' is 'mearh', close to 'mere' meaning 'mare', or female horse. But the spells are of course handwritten, and it is possible that the word is really the Anglo-Saxon 'mare', which means 'a feminine goblin or succuba'. And this is confirmed by analysis of the spell by Anglo-Saxon linguistic scholars, which has focused on the word translated as 'spider creature', which is written as 'dwear'. This

is closely related to the Anglo-Saxon word 'dweorg', meaning 'dwarf'. So if the spider creature also has the identity of a dwarf from the Lowerworld, it extends our understanding of the source of the initiation considerably.¹⁸

So the apprentice, in an altered state of consciousness, is taken to Le-Hev-Hev by a spider creature in order to be exposed to sacred teachings. But the web-spinning spider also represents the magic of a dwarf, who in turn is one of the Wyrð Sisters in transmuted form. Even more directly, the spider, as a shapeshifted dwarf, represents the powers of the shamanic goddess Freya, who was a later incarnation of the Wyrð Sisters.

In the mythology of ancient Europe, the dwarfs had a special connection to Freya. In fact, in some sense the dwarfs can be seen as doing the work of the sisters; they are an incarnation of the Wyrð Women. The dwarfs were, in the ancient stories, responsible for making magical objects for the gods and goddesses. The animal most sacred to Freya was the sow, and her nickname, Syr, means sow, and for her later male aspect Frey it was the boar, twin symbols which had originally been associated with the worship of the Great Goddess Mother Earth. The dwarfs made golden images of these animals on which the goddess and god rode. Freya's sow was called Hildisvin (Battle Pig) and Frey's boar was called Guillinbursti (Gold Bristled); they could outrun any horse.¹⁹

The goddess Freya is reckoned to have obtained a famous, or infamous, piece of sacred jewellery, the necklace of the Brisings. There is no doubting the fame and fortune of the necklace itself, a famous piece of jewellery in European mythology. One of the various references to it is in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*: 'Never under heaven have I heard of a finer prize among heroes — since Hama carried off the Brising necklace to his bright city, that gold-cased jewel . . .'²⁰

Scholars debate the identity of the Brisings, but many reckon them to be four dwarfs of the Lowerworld. And to obtain the necklace, Freya slept with all four dwarfs. It may have originally been that she had sexual relations with all four, simultaneously or over four nights. Indeed, Freya is represented in the later sagas as Thorgerda, and as

consorting with trolls and evil creatures of all kinds. The Christian writers who document some of the stories about Freya are deeply disapproving of this aspect of her, and we get only fragments of her exploits as a result. Historians reckon that most of the myths, stories and ceremonies which concerned Freya were either not written down at all, or were written but later destroyed because of the often erotic nature of her mysteries; they were especially singled out for eradication by the monkish missionaries to the north. Even in normally tolerant Iceland, her poetry – the ‘mansongr’ (love song) – was prohibited.

But certainly Freya’s sleeping with the dwarfs in return for the necklace seems to have been pivotal in her lascivious reputation. Brising is the name of some tribe or family; the word derives from the Old Norse ‘brisingr’, meaning ‘fire’. So Brisings means ‘fire-dwarfs’. Or the ‘shining ones’. Either way it refers either to their gold-making or to the fire they use, or both. Although we are not sure of the identity of these four dwarfs, it has been suggested that they were Nordhri, Austri, Sudhri, and Vestri, identified elsewhere as being stationed at the four cardinal directions of the world, supporting the Upperworld. Recent Eskimo cultural traditions tell of four posts supporting the firmament, and when the posts go rotten they have to be renewed by the angekok or wizards.

In describing the cosmology, Snorri Sturluson also says: ‘Four stags browse over the branches of the Ash and nibble at the bark. I’ll tell you their names: Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr and Duradrörr.’ But Dvalinn is one of the dwarfs . . . so maybe these stags are the characters who taught Freya?

The necklace of the Brisings is much more than a pretty trinket. It is the all-encompassing fourfold cosmic ring, under the control of the great goddess Freya. It is the magical equivalent of the Midgardh-Serpent that girdles the entire cosmos. The object is said to be worn either as a belt or as a necklace, depending on how the goddess wished to use its power. In any event, the result is the same: Freya gains control over the fourfold cycle of the cosmos and its generative and regenerative powers.

In the *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, Hilda Ellis Davidson

writes: ‘A necklace is something which is associated with the mother goddess from very early times. Figurines wearing necklaces found in the Mediterranean area date back to as far as 3000 BC, and small female figures wearing them have survived from the Bronze Age in Denmark and are thought to represent a fertility deity.’

From the above discussion, it seems likely that Freya’s relationship with the dwarfs was an aspect of her initiation. She possibly had ritual sex with the four dwarfs as part of her quest for knowledge. In addition to their alchemical abilities as magical smiths, the dwarfs were depicted as having wisdom. For example, the myths tell about Alvis, a dwarf living in the World of Dark Elves. In a twelfth-century Eddaic poem he reveals some of his wisdom about the various realms of the universe. The name for night varies, he says, from one realm to another. The war gods, fertility gods and giants refer to it by its quality of a dark blanket (Darkness, Hood and Lightless respectively), and the elves call it Sleep’s Soothing. The dwarfs, however, refer directly to the Magical Quality of Night, its use as a special, ritual time, its relation to their function as spinners of spells. They call it the Weaver of Dreams. And this is precisely what the dwarf/spider creature does in the initiation spell considered at the outset of this chapter. The content and nature of the dreams that are woven, wrapped in the threads of Wyrð, constitute the process by which the apprentice becomes a shaman.

— Altered States of Consciousness —

The vivid visions of the spider spell, in which the apprentice was gripped by a spider creature which rode him into the sky, cooling his heated body, landed him on an island, where he perhaps danced a pattern in the sand, thereby being admitted into the presence of the spider goddess, and then being given access to the secret knowledge of the dwarfs . . . this of course is the sort of experience which is concomitant with a radically altered state of consciousness; a mind-set very different from the reality-testing and conventionally focused cognition of everyday life. Indeed, if we had such visions as part of our daily life it would be impossible to function, and those people who

undergo such powerful inner visions involuntarily usually suffer as a result and sometimes need treatment and support in a protected environment in order to be able to recover.

One name for the spider creature rendered into modern English is the Night Mare. Such images are not outside our own experience, therefore; almost everyone has at some point in their life experienced deep and disturbing dreams. So we all have the psychological capacity and the images to enter the world of the nightmare.

Today we generally regard such powerful experiences as being a by-product of brain 'over-activity' while we are trying to sleep; we have had a 'bad night'. In traditional societies, however, including that of our ancestors in ancient Europe, such dreamings were regarded as having special significance and value. They were an essential element of the range of human experience, and the images were seen as emanating from the deep, universal pool of the spirit world.²¹

Today the nearest concept to this that we have in the West is perhaps the collective unconscious, developed particularly by the Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung during the first half of this century. He characterised some of our deeper dream and art images as being shared among all humans, and expressing certain propensities to see the world in ways which were a consequence of our biological and neurological make-up. These deep dreamings were a dipping into a universal consciousness. Similarly, our ancestors thought that such images, such journeys as were undertaken by the apprentice with the spider creature, were as experientially valid as everyday material world activities. They were never regarded as 'just' dreaming. They were as important to the understanding of life and of ourselves as waking activity.

Interestingly, today we seem just as hungry for vivid imagery as ever, but for us it is provided in ready-packaged form for us to consume, rather than to produce. We spend significant chunks of our lives watching images on television, and in the cinema, at rock concerts and spectacles of all kinds. But these images, as well as being manufactured for us, are regarded as 'entertainment'. They are a break from the more serious business of the mundane imagery of everyday life. For our ancestors, the potential psychological power and insight

obtainable from entering such imaginal worlds ourselves was developed to a sophisticated degree.

But dreaming is an involuntary entry into an image world akin to that of the spider creature, since most of us do not have direct control over the content and structure of our dreams. In cultures in which shamans functioned as 'dream doctors', which covers almost every traditional society there has ever been, their task was to set up for people, especially those who had been shown to be especially gifted in being able to enter the vivid world of the spirits, psychological journeys in which entry to and return from such worlds was created specifically and consciously.

In order to achieve this journeying ability, shamans themselves engineered their states of consciousness in a number of ways. Many of them undermined the supports which help us to maintain the everyday state of consensual reality. They would deprive themselves of sleep, staying up for marathon numbers of hours all through the nights and days, and most of us have experienced the disorienting effects of sleep deprivation from time to time. They fasted, thus setting aside the confirming, relaxing, comforting and conventionalising effect of eating food regularly, calming hunger pangs and maintaining a high blood sugar level. They went without drink, which soon releases the mind from the usual range of psychological states, and enables it to explore regions previously uncharted.

The shamans also performed marathon dances, so that the rhythmic bodily undulations and beatings of the feet on the floor attuned the mind-body to the rhythm of the spirits. They chanted and sang, shouted and called, intuiting the language of the spirits and using their voices to take them into other realms. Shamans also imbibed various concoctions prepared from selected plants to help to induce visions, glimpses of the Otherworld, sensations of flying, and a number of supporting experiences which empowered their travel out of this mundane world.

In many shamanic cultures, including those of ancient Europe, the shamans used drums to drive their journeying into the spirit world. The rhythmic percussion acts on the brainwaves to produce an effect that drives along the imagination, the flow of images, or perhaps

opens up access to images coming from 'another realm'. It overrides the propensity of the mind to wander, to daydream, to lose concentration, to lack momentum in a vision journey; with the drums shamans can keep up a vivid spirit journey for hours at a time.

Of course, in traditional societies where shamans were present to supervise, advise, support and guide involuntary journeys which come from illness, or voluntary journeys which are created through ritual and technique, there is the opportunity for experiences ranging from mild to extreme, depending on whether one is simply a participant in a group tribal event, or whether one is training to be a shaman.

Such journeys in altered states of consciousness are best done under supervision, but there is another way to appreciate and use the idea of threads, the spider, the grip of life, a technique which is a gentle meditation from within the everyday state of consciousness: it can be done with ease and is a subtle but far-reaching way to alter one's idea of the forces and influences on one's life. I call it the Web of Wyrð.

— Mapping Your Web of Life —

I have described the way in which the tribespeople of ancient Europe held in their heads, hearts and artwork an image of a web of golden threads suspending, connecting, and integrating everything in life. The web was so sensitive that any movement, any thought, any happening, no matter how small, reverberates throughout the web, so that everything that happens involves everything else. The image can be a basis for revisioning the way in which we feel connected to other people, other influences and forces. I believe that the implications for our self-understanding are substantial, and it would take an entire book even to begin to explore comprehensively.

In order to find practical ways of working with this vision of our ancestors, I have explored a process of mapping personal webs of threads in which a series of tasks subtly shifts our usual awareness of others to a different dimension, a connected awareness which is akin in some ways to the Web of Wyrð. This process can entail many levels of elaboration and sophistication, and I have used it in working with individuals and in groups. But the basic idea is quite simple. It consists

of creating an image of the ways in which our own personal world of relationships forms a web, threads of forces, of which we are a part. I shall describe the basic process here and you could adapt it for your personal use quite simply, as a sort of active meditation.

The first thing I ask people to do is to take a sheet of paper, and a pen, and to list the names of everyone they know. This sounds an impossible and paralysing task, for we all assume that we know thousands of people, far too many to list on paper from memory. And this is probably true, if we include absolutely everyone with whom we have ever come into contact. But the list of names should be those people in your lives now who have a positive emotional importance for you. Not people who have died (these are very important but are addressed in a separate meditation), or people you used to know, nor people you know but who are not significant emotionally, or those people whom you dislike or even hate. Only people who are positive and important to you now are included on this first list.

For most of us, listing people who mean more to us than mere acquaintances is not so difficult, the numbers not so great. In my experience, it takes people between half an hour and an hour to write down all the appropriate names, but this timeframe is meant purely for encouragement; you can take longer or shorter times than this. The important thing is to work at a speed which feels comfortable and enjoyable. And there are no right or wrong numbers of people: we differ enormously in the range of our personal contacts, and also in the cut-off level of intimacy we choose to determine whether a person is emotionally important to us. When working with individuals, I have found people keen to explore these aspects of the process in relation to their own lives.

The threads of our personal connections may be mapped in many ways, but the first web I ask people to construct is one based on 'material-world' geography. When you have completed the list of names, next take a large sheet of paper and draw a map. Usually for beginning work we copy a map of the world, or North America or Europe; a large-scale piece of the world which incorporates the country in which we live. For subsequent work more detailed maps may be appropriate. The map does not have to be exact, so long as it gives a

reasonable sense of the geographical extent and location of those parts of the world you are going to incorporate in your meditation.

Mark on the map, with a dot, the place where you currently live, and which forms the geographical centrepiece of your activities. Then, taking your time and working carefully and accurately, and using a different-coloured pen to before, mark on the map the homes of each of the people named on your list. For most of us, this process results in some names being dotted far and wide around the world, and a far greater number being marked nearer to our own home location. But everyone's map is different, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' maps.

The final stage of this task is very carefully and accurately to draw straight lines from the dot representing our own location to each and every other dot on the world map. This can be done in one colour, or using different-coloured pens or pencils for the lines, depending on the nature of your relationship with the person.

You now have a geographical representation of your 'significant other' network, depicting the lines of positive energy that come your way from people who mean a lot to you. It is a map constructed in physical, geographical space, of where we are in our personal universe; the map looks like a huge spider's web, and we can see our position in it; it is a map of supporting threads, keeping us safe.

Apart from those closest to us, with whom we live or share our lives directly, most of us think of the special people in our lives only occasionally, usually one at a time; rarely do we encounter a representation of their sum total. The people with whom I have worked on such webs are often surprised by the cumulative effect of seeing all those threads coming to them from around the country, or around the world. It is a map of encouragement and support, of strength sustained by others, an extended view of one's own emotional territory. A number of the people who constructed these webs have made them into wall-charts; much more directly affecting than ordinary maps of the world!

There are various elaborations you can make even to such a simple web as this: for example, you might find it interesting to join to one another the dots of people in your web who are close to each other

emotionally, forming cross-threads in the web. Again there is no right answer; some people have a very integrated web in which many dots are connected to each other, whereas others have a more separated web, in which the lines of personal influence come directly to the mapmaker's location, but do not join up between themselves very much.

As an image of love connections, this basic web is a nice start. But then the real work begins. For it is in using the web of fibres as a meditation which yields the deeper elements of this whole exercise, and begins to edge a little closer to the tremendous range and meaning of the original vision of our ancestors. For with the web ranged in front of you, you can take your time to rest your eye on each dot (most people who have practised this meditation quickly achieve recognition of the identity of each dot without needing to consult the list of names), and allow an image of that person to fill your mind's eye. It is not only a visual image, of course; these are people who are special to you, and so it is also a heart image.

Meditating on these maps is an exhilarating, warming, comforting, and moving experience. It can last anywhere from five minutes (which can be long enough if you are concentrating on one person only at each meditation) to perhaps half an hour or more. But no matter how few or how many people are visualised at each meditation, the session should finish with a contemplation of the whole; the complexity and unity of the entire web is what you should take away with you at the conclusion of each of these times.

From here there are many possibilities. We can abandon physical space maps, and instead construct maps, sometimes three-dimensional, in which we paint images of the threads penetrating our own lives, starting with those influences of which we are consciously aware – people, events, hopes and fears – and then moving on to fibres which can be apprehended only through meditation and inner visioning. These psychic maps are tremendously clarifying, both in their construction and in meditations on them, for they provide a vivid alternative to the jumble of thoughts with which we often attempt to conceptualise the myriad influences operating upon us at any one time.

If you are feeling low, discouraged, or lonely, this simple meditation can be very supportive; you can construct, for example, a web of allies, a web of guardians, a web of companions, or even a web of love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seeress:

Divining Through Deep Intuition

— Thorbiorg's Seance —

We have considered some of the beliefs and practices of our ancestors which address the capacity for intuitive living. This valuing of the ability to open our ways of feeling and thinking to a broader and deeper reservoir of experience than can be carried in our conscious processing went further even than everyday levels of ability, for the tribespeople of early Europe had individuals who had been selected, divined, chosen by the spirits, trained, initiated, for the express purpose of being able to enter deeply into the intuitive mode. They were men and women. But those who specialised in using, directly, deep intuition in order to be able to see into the future, were almost always women (men more often used spellcasting for this purpose). Seership of this kind was considered, in ancient Europe, to be a feminine power, used on occasion by men, but essentially practised by women.

A thousand years ago, in Iceland, an account was written of the work of one of these women; it is one of the most vivid descriptions of early European shamanic ceremonies and affords some detail in envisioning her divinatory rituals, and in gaining a closer understanding of the gift of deep intuition.

The saga *Erik the Red*, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in Iceland, depicts the lives of people during the so-called 'saga age' of 930–1030.¹ It includes an account of a seeress named Thorbiorg. The saga is set in Greenland, but historians think it likely that the shamanic tradition documented in the tale thrived in Norway in the tenth century and before. It is possible that Thorbiorg was a historical person. In the account it is clear that she was widely renowned; she was nicknamed Little Sibyl, and was known as the last